Sample Essay on “The Veldt” by Ray Bradbury

Choose a novel **or** short story which has a striking ending.

Show how the ending is effective with reference to the novel or short story as a whole.

Ray Bradbury's futuristic short story "The Veldt" is a striking example of a short story with a shocking ending. Set in a believable future, it depicts a day in the life of the Hadleys; father George, mother Lydia and ten year old twins Peter and Wendy. "Their soundproofed Happy-Life Home", which cost $30,000, has a nursery, capable of creating real life scenes from the children's imagination. The ending is effective as it conveys the story’s key themes of man vs machine and abandonment through Bradbury’s use of techniques such as characterisation, tone and symbolism.   
  
The structure of the story develops a strong sense of doom and foreboding from the very start. On his return from work, George is asked by Lydia to contact a psychologist to look at the nursery. Instinctively she realises it is "different now" and fears that Peter "with that LQ. of his" has programmed it to remain in the baking heat of the African veldt. Symbolically only adults seem physically uncomfortable in this landscape and our attention is drawn to George's "sweating face" here, which foreshadows how McClean, the psychologist, will also begin to perspire there at the end.   
  
Bradbury cleverly builds up this sense of menace by a variety of techniques. He focuses on the colour yellow for the sun and the colour of the lions . The hidden "odorophonics" in the nursery let us imagine the smell of the fresh meat coming from "the panting, dripping mouths of the lions". Vultures cast shadows on the landscape, both literally and metaphorically, a device which is used to great effect both at the start and the end of the story to create its circular structure. These are obviously associated with death, normally of animals, but at the shocking end of the story the deaths are those of George and Lydia.   
  
Another interesting technique used by Bradbury is the recurring scream heard by the Hadleys and coming from the nursery. These screams are heard on two occasions, followed by the roar of the lions. The third time George says of the screams, "they sound familiar" but he can't think why. Only once both parents have been locked into the nursery by their children do the parents realise it was their own voices they had heard in advance of being attacked by the lions.   
  
As well as the motif of these screams, Bradbury also introduces real, personal objects of the parents into the nursery. The first is an old wallet of George's, now chewed "with blood smears on both sides". He is shocked by this but more alarmed by McClean finding "a bloody scarf' of Lydia's in the nursery. It is this discovery which prompts both men to throw "the switch that killed the nursery". The objects are ordinary and recognisable to us as readers despite the futuristic setting, which makes the fact that they are bloodied yet more shocking. These items also foreshadow the inevitable death of George and Lydia and build up tension towards the story’s climax.  
  
The language used throughout the story exemplifies Bradbury's fear for the future of mankind if machines take over: his new word "automaticity" sums this up. In their ironically named "Happy-life Home" the Hadleys do nothing. Machines cook, clean, wash, clean their teeth, shine their shoes, take them upstairs and even rock them to sleep. When ketchup is not on the dining table "a small voice within the table" apologises and it appears. The results of such a life of ease and luxury are apparent. Lydia is bored and very importantly realises that "The house is wife and mother and house maid." She knows she cannot compete with an African veldt. George is smoking and drinking too much and needs more sedative each night to help him sleep. This links to the key theme of abandonment as it is this boredom that leads to George and Lydia neglecting their role as parents. The ending shows the final outcome of this when the children become fully disassociated with their parents and kill them, then calmly have a picnic.   
  
Bradbury’s skilful use of characterisation of the children is also striking. Alarmingly only the children seem content in their own "Never Never Land". Symbolically Bradbury names them Peter and Wendy, main characters in J.M.Barry's "Peter Pan", who lived in a land free from adult control where they never grew up. On the surface these children seem innocent and beautiful with their "cheeks like peppermint candy" and "eyes like bright blue agate" but in reality they are spoiled and manipulative, the clear result of getting everything they want apart from a "rocket trip to New York". The children are almost idealised in these descriptions of them – therefore making the ugly nature of the parents’ murder more striking.   
  
Perhaps the most remarkable characterisation revealed through the story is that of Peter. Towards the end, ironically and too late, George realises that "children are carpets, they should be stepped on occasionally" and decides to turn off the nursery. Both children are upset but Peter's choice of language coupled with his body language is most revealing. He avoids all eye contact with his father and ultimately threatens him not to turn off the nursery. He seems to be speaking to the nursery directly as to a person, as it has now become both mother and father to the children. Normal parent - child relationships have been replaced by mechanism and wish fulfilment. Peter’s coldness, caused by his perceived abandonment by his parents, shows fully the themes of man vs. machine and abandonment. Peter has become emotionless, more like a machine than a human suggesting that the machine has won by the end of the story.   
  
The story’s conclusion can be seen to emphasise further the themes of man vs. Machine and abandonment. Peter shouts at his father 'Oh, I hate you! ... I wish you were dead!" and so it comes to pass. At the end the children symbolically eat a "picnic lunch" in the "open glade" of the veldt. All appears innocent and childlike. Only the sweating reaction of the psychologist when he comes in to look for George and Lydia reminds us of the harsh truth of this brutal murder. Wendy is already replacing her mother as she offers a cup of tea but overhead vultures are "dropping down a blazing sky." The children are finally alone in the world, and we question whether McLean, or even they will suffer a similar fate to their parents as the lines between illusion and reality blur if the machines become increasingly powerful.  
  
Lastly Bradbury has created both a dramatic and a shocking ending to the "The Veldt." The use of the futuristic setting to tackle 1950s anxieties over the role of machinery in domestic life is effective, and the foreshadowing and symbolism used engage the reader. Beyond this, he has allowed us into his worrying vision of how our obsession with automation and artificial intelligence may end.